DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 341 519 PS 020 324

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TITLE How Well Do Children Learn Sexual Abuse Prevention Concepts?
PUB DATE Aug 91
NOTE 16p.; Paper presented at the Annual Convention of the American Psychological Association (99th, San Francisco, CA, August 16-20, 1991).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Research/Technical (143)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Child Abuse; Cognitive Ability; Decision Making; *Preschool Children; Preschool Education; *Prevention; *Sexual Abuse; *Situational Tests; Skill Development; *Social Cognition

ABSTRACT

In a study of young children's knowledge of sexual abuse, it was hypothesized that not all skill components that children needed to enable them to recognize and handle sexual abuse would be learned to the same degree. Participants were 117 children of 3-6 years of age from 4 preschools. The Grossmont College Sexual Abuse Prevention Program intervention that was used taught the "No, Go, Tell" message with interactive lessons and puppets during five 20-minute segments. Pre- and post-tests were administered using the What If Situations Test (WIST). Each child was asked to imagine being in five hypothetical situations, including four sexual abuse situations and one situation in which the child received an appropriate touch from a parent. The four sexual abuse stories measured a child's ability to refuse the perpetrator, leave the situation, and report the sexual advances. Analysis of the results suggested that mastery of certain skills was related to age. Younger preschoolers were unable to recognize an abusive situation even though they demonstrated the ability to reject the perpetrator and leave the situation. One explanation was that young children's responses are less cognitively based and more affectively based. It was concluded that programs must be more finely tailored to the needs and developmental capabilities of younger preschool children and that current methods of teaching the NO, GO, TELL skills may be inadequate. Contains 11 references. (LB)

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HOW WELL DO CHILDREN LEARN SEXUAL ABUSE PREVENTION CONCEPTS?

by

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PS 020324

Running head: CHILDREN LEARN CONCEPTS

Paper presented in M.P. McGrath (Chair), New Perspectives on Sexual Abuse Education for Preschoolers. Symposium conducted at the 1991 annual convention of the American Psychological Association, San Francisco, CA.

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INTRODUCTION

Much of the extant research has affirmed that preschoolers are successful in learning the concepts taught by sexual abuse prevention programs (e.g., Conte, 1985; Wurtele, Kast, Miller-Perrin, and Kondrick, 1989). The "What If Situations Test" (WIST; Saslawsky and Wurtele, 1986) is probably the most psychometrically sophisticated measure of these concepts available. It uses several stories about appropriate and inappropriate touch to assess children's knowledge gain. Until recently, most studies employing this scale have used a composite score. Unfortunately, composite scores mask the coordinated series of cognitive steps that are taught in sexual abuse prevention programs. A child must recognize that a situation is either safe or potentially abusive, verbally reject the perpetrator, escape from the situation, report the incident to a responsible adult, and make an informative disclosure to this person.

Analyses using WIST components are essential because composite scores cannot detect differential acquisition of skills, nor can they evaluate the possibility that these components may be learned in a developmentally hierarchical sequence. For instance, in order for children to "say no", they may first need to "recognize" the situation as being inappropriate.

Because the major skills taught in sexual abuse prevention programs seem conceptually distinct, confirmatory factor analysis (i.e., cluster analysis) should prove them *statistically* distinct. Hence, this study is a first attempt to demonstrate empirically that knowledge of sexual abuse is composed of several separate skill components. It was

hypothesized that not all skill components would be learned to the same degree of competence. Further, we attempted to demonstrate that skills were acquired according to a logical hierarchical sequence.

METHOD

Participants were 117 children from 4 preschools, ages 3-6. They were matched for gender and randomly assigned to a treatment or delayed treatment control group. The intervention, named the Grossmont College Sexual Abuse Prevention Program, teaches the "NO, GO, TELL" message with interactive lessons and puppets during five, twenty-minute segments. Prior to and following completion of this program, children were individually administered several measures by examiners who were blind to their experimental condition.

The measure relevant to the present paper is the WIST. Each child was asked to imagine him/herself in five hypothetical situations. There are four sexual abuse situations: a cousin who begins touching the child inappropriately while wrestling, an uncle who asks to take nude pictures of the child, a babysitter who bribes the child to touch her private parts, and a man in a park who bribes to touch the child. A fifth story involves appropriate touch, a parent who asks to touch a child's injured private parts. Each story measures recognition of whether the touch is appropriate or not. The four sexual abuse stories measure a child's ability to verbally refuse the perpetrator, leave the situation, report sexual advances to someone, and make an informative disclosure to this person.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Cluster analysis confirmed that the WIST is comprised of the six components mentioned above (see Figure 1 and 2). We refer to these as: (1) "RECOGNITION" -- recognizing inappropriate touch; (2) "SAY-NO" -- verbally rejecting the perpetrator; (3) "GO" -- physically escaping from the situation; (4) "TELL-WHO" -- reporting inappropriate sexual advances to someone; (5) "TELL-WHAT" -- making an informative disclosure to this person; and (6) "BENIGN" (recognizing benign touch). These findings also indicate a need for further scale development. Because there is evidence that knowledge about appropriate touch is distinct from inappropriate touch, more items assessing children's responses to appropriate touch should be included in the measure. The latest revision of the WIST (Wurtele, 1990) has incorporated two more appropriate touch stories. Confirmatory factor analyses are now necessary to determine whether the three stories in the revised WIST are measuring similar constructs.

A repeated-measures 2 X 2 MANOVA (Condition x Time) was conducted on the total WIST score and the six components. Findings revealed significant Condition X Time interactions for the total WIST score [$F(1,104)=5.39$, $p<.05$], SAY-NO [$F(1,103)=7.22$, $p<.05$], and TELL-WHO [$F(1,101)= 7.67$, $p<.05$] variables.

Insert Figure 2 about here

In each case, the treatment group scored significantly better than controls over time. Although our data revealed an increase on the WIST overall composite score at posttest, this increase stemmed specifically from the SAY-NO and TELL-WHO variables. Program evaluations employing only composite scores may require reanalysis because our results suggest that children may be mastering certain skills more readily than others.

To test this theory more explicitly, we predicted a hierarchical learning pattern of the five components (i.e., RECOGNITION, SAY-NO, GO, TELL-WHO, TELL-WHAT). BENIGN touch was removed from consideration because it is conceptually and statistically distinct from inappropriate touch. The proposed hierarchical model assumes that children conform to one of six patterns of learning, called KNOWLEDGE-LEVELS.

Insert Figure 3 about here

In Figure 3, a 1 score means that a child mastered the particular WIST component for at least 3 of the 4 stories; a 0 indicates the child has mastered that component on less than 3 stories. At pretest, this hierarchical matrix accounted for 54% of the sample. When three extra levels were added, 86% of the sample was accounted for (see Figure 4). Two of these levels (3 and 5) were added when *a priori* analyses revealed a large percentage of children who answered SAY-NO and GO items correctly despite their failure on the RECOGNITION items. 83% of these children were in the two younger age groups. Older children were far less likely to demonstrate this reversal in the hierarchical sequence. Pretest analyses with the

nine knowledge levels also revealed highly significant Age effects [$F(1,116)= 6.9$, $p<.001$]. Older children demonstrated proficiency across more skill components than younger children, even prior to the intervention. A repeated measures 2 x 2 x 3 MANOVA (Condition by Time by Age) using KNOWLEDGE-LEVELS as the dependent variable revealed no Condition x Time effects nor Condition x Time x Age effects. However, because the main effect for Age was highly significant, a separate analysis was performed for each of the three age groups. Significant Condition x Time effects [$F(1,36)=3.98$, $p<.05$] were detected for only the oldest age group who scored at higher knowledge levels than the two younger age groups.

Our analyses suggest that mastery of certain skills is related to age. Most studies (e.g., Conte, 1985; Miller-Perrin and Wurtele, 1989) examining the relationship between age and knowledge acquisition compare children from more obviously discrete age groups (e.g., preschool vs. school-age children). Our data demonstrate that significant differences can be found even between children ages 3 to 5. Older preschool children seem to be at an advantage both in their initial knowledge of these skill areas and in their ability to learn these concepts from the intervention. These children make the most significant advances in the proposed hierarchical progression. Further, younger preschoolers are often unable to recognize an abusive situation even though they demonstrate the ability to reject the perpetrator and leave the situation. One explanation for these results may be that young children's responses to sexual abuse situations are less cognitively-based and more affectively-based. Therefore, programs that encourage children to trust and act on their negative feelings in sexually abusive situations may be more effective with young

preschoolers than those that merely emphasize a cognitive appraisal of these situations. (For further discussion on affect and learning sexual abuse prevention concepts, see Kiemel and Bogat, 1991.)

The MANOVAs reported so far have not accounted for the possibility that children may perform differentially across WIST stories. In the following analyses, "Story" was introduced as a within-subjects factor. At pretest, significant story differences were found for the SAY-NO ($p<.01$) and GO ($p<.001$) components.

Insert Figure 4 about here

For both of these components, children were significantly more competent on story 1 (wrestling with a cousin) and least competent on story 3 (babysitter's bribe to touch private parts). This may be explained by differences in children's relationships with peers and adults. Children perceive their relationships with each other as more egalitarian; whereas, children being nice to adults involves obeisance (Youniss, 1980). Thus, children may feel free to reject their cousin's advances and leave the situation with no need to defer. The babysitter story may be particularly difficult both because children are socialized to obey adults and because parents especially reinforce this principle with babysitters. These findings suggest that children's mastery of certain WIST skills may be influenced by characteristics of the perpetrator and the situation, as well as children's notions of authority (for further discussion, see Grober, 1991; and Bogat, 1991).

In sum, programs must be more finely tailored to the needs and developmental capabilities of younger preschoolers. The fact that children were less apt to master the RECOGNITION, GO, and TELL-WHAT components indicates the need to rethink program expectations for this age group. For instance, informative disclosures may be better achieved from preschool children if responsible adults are taught methods of effective prompting. Further, children as young as age three who cannot cognitively recognize the threat of sex abuse situations may experience instinctive emotional cues during these situations. Although a recent study (Wurtele, Saslawsky, Miller, Marrs, and Britcher, 1989) comparing children's success in Feeling-Based vs. conventional sexual abuse programs found little difference, our data suggests that this study should be reconducted with three-year-olds. Finally, current methods of teaching these three skills to preschoolers may be inadequate. Perhaps simply instructing children to "get away" from a perpetrator is not enough to prepare them for situations where physical escape may be less feasible (e.g., when with a babysitter). A more instructive approach may involve enhancing children's ability to problem-solve and generate alternative means of escaping in various situations.

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Figure 1. MSU CLUSTER ANALYSIS

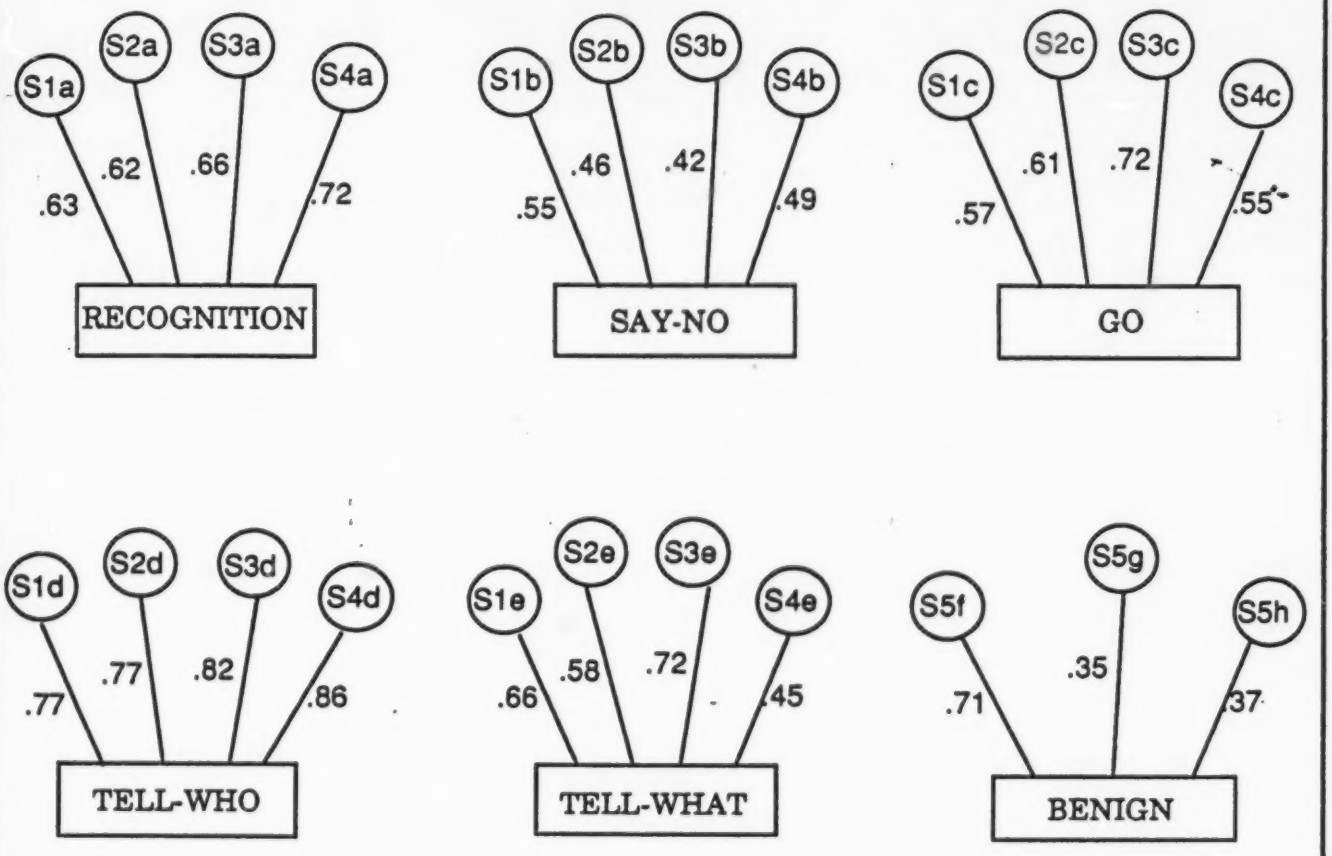

Figure 2. COMPOSITE SCORE ANALYSIS

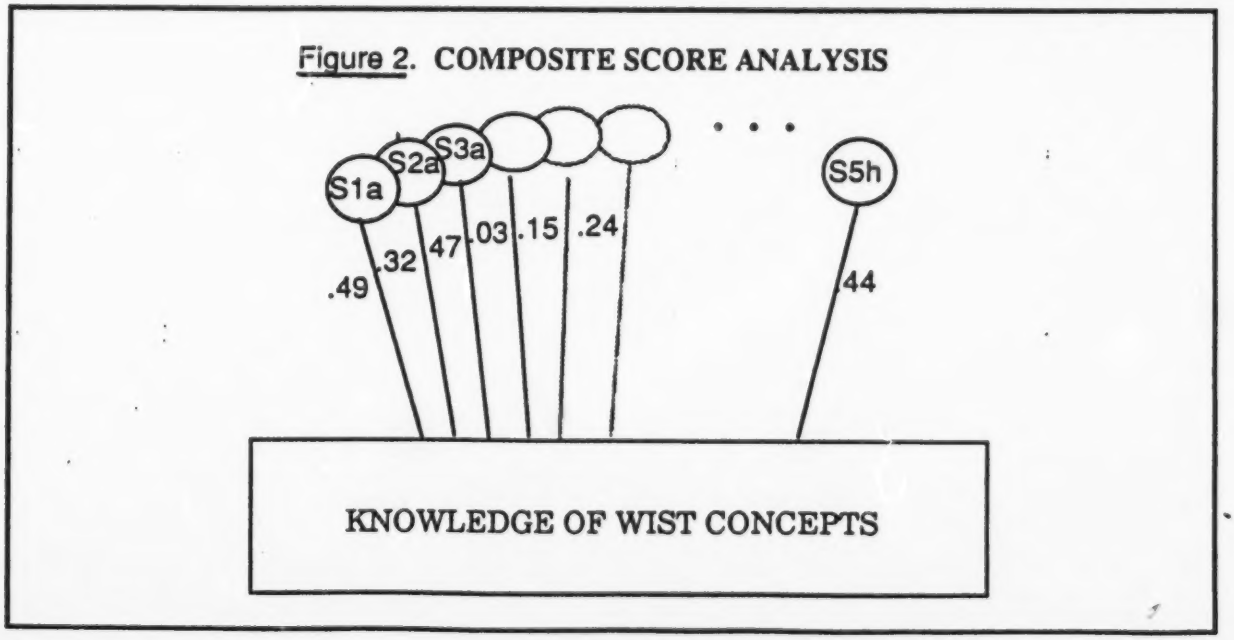

Figure 3. Condition by Time effects for Wist Components.

WIST-COMPOSITE*	F = 5.39, p < .05
RECOGNITION	NS
SAY-NO*	F = 7.22, p < .05
GO	NS
TELL-WHO*	F = 7.67, p < .05
TELL-WHAT	NS
BENIGN	NS

NS = Not Significant

Figure 4. Hierarchical skill acquisition sequence.

	Recognition	Say-No	Go	Tell-Who	Tell-What	% of Ss w/pattern
Level 1	0	0	0	0	0	14.5%
Level 2	1	0	0	0	0	3.4%
Level 3	1	1	0	0	0	12.8%
Level 4	1	1	1	0	0	6.8%
Level 5	1	1	1	1	0	11.1%
Level 6	1	1	1	1	1	5.1%

% of Sample Accounted for: 54.0%

Figure 5. REVISED SKILL ACQUISITION SEQUENCE

	Recognition	Say-No	Go	Tell-Who	Tell-What	% of Ss w/pattern
Level 1	0	0	0	0	0	14.5%
Level 2	1	0	0	0	0	3.4%
*Level 3	0	1	0	0	0	17.1%
Level 4	1	1	0	0	0	12.8%
*Level 5	0	1	1	0	0	7.7%
Level 6	1	1	1	0	0	6.8%
*Level 7	1	1	0	1	0	7.7%
Level 8	1	1	1	1	0	11.1%
Level 9	1	1	1	1	1	5.1%

* Additional Levels

% of Sample Accounted for: 86.0%
N = 101

Figure 6. INFLUENCE OF STORY ON SAY-NO AND GO COMPONENTS